



# Big Wheels and Officeholder Accounts

Posted by **Pierluigi Oliverio** on Monday, June 04, 2007

## City Hall Diary

Did you ever borrow a friend's toy as a kid because you didn't have one of your own? I did. I would borrow my friend's Big Wheel. My parents advised me to be happy with what I had and warned me about becoming dependent on borrowing my friend's toy for fulfillment. Well, I didn't listen to my parents' sound advice. Instead, I wanted to ride the Big Wheel more and more. So, I gave the owner Twinkies and cupcakes in exchange for riding the Big Wheel.

After a short time, I did become dependent on my friend's Big Wheel. Sometimes I would become angry if I couldn't ride it because I felt it was my right. After all, I gave my friend a cupcake and, in turn, he should return the favor.

My borrowing of the Big Wheel is like asking for money for an officeholder account; neither is unconditional and both have expectations that might get out of hand. An officeholder account, also known as a friend account, is a pot of money that council members have solicited from people they know. It is campaigning. The limit for an account is about \$10,000. Most of the time, the folks who give money want something from the council member—perhaps funding for a group or, more often, a zoning change and/or land use issue passed. The soliciting of funds for an account to use while in office is a conflict of interest.

For many years, San Jose city council members have had the ability to have an officeholder account to pay for items and expenses at their own discretion. Most of these expenses from the account are spent in the community for constituent functions like school and community events.

Council members are expected to attend these community events as part of their job and are happy to do so. As we know, the council member's pay is low and to assume or expect council members to spend thousands of dollars on events would not be fair.

Officeholder accounts should be eliminated as we know them today. Instead, I would propose that each council office should receive at least \$3,000 a year to attend community events (NOT political events). \$3,000 is an appropriate amount. If a council member has an existing officeholder account, then they should be allowed to spend down that account; but, in the future, the city should do away with them.

I believe that most council members use the money justly and appropriately. However, with the city converting industrial land, it makes me wonder what would happen if the big developers, lobbyists and people of influence were not able to fund officeholder accounts. Would elected officials be less likely to be influenced?

Let's do away with officeholder accounts and find out.

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